

City Hall Makes Strides Toward Becoming Eco-Friendly

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Staff photos by Bob Hammerstrom



Where some see a dirt-filled planter, Angela Vincent sees water going down a sink's drain and being diverted to nourish flowers.

During a walking tour of Nashua City Hall, she wonders why the city couldn't have purchased a new printer to spit out double-sided sheets on recycled paper.

Or why not post reminders to turn off lights?

As a member of the "green team" at Nashua City Hall, urban planner Angela Vincent is often seen turning the lights off in rooms not being used. Vincent and other green team members from various city departments are trying to make fellow employees aware of conserving energy.

"It didn't have to be on. Nobody was in there," Vincent, an urban planner, said after a quick detour to flip off the lights in Room 208.

City Hall is brushing up its credentials as an eco-friendly place as part of a national effort by local governments to curb greenhouse gases, pollution that has been linked to climate change and global warming.

The potential consequences are more than just a few warmer days, according to many scientists. Familiar sights of New England are believed to be at risk, and local industry could take a financial hit.

An Environmental Protection Agency study predicted temperatures inching up in New Hampshire by four degrees in spring by 2100 and by about five degrees the rest of the year.

Sea level along the state's shoreline has been rising by seven inches per century, and it's likely to rise another 18 inches by 2100. Replenishing beach sand is expected to carry a cumulative cost of between \$39 million and \$304 million, according to the EPA.

A "green team" is getting off the ground in Nashua City Hall, using a 2000 environmental study of Nashua as a foundation to reduce pollution across the city. The community survey assisted by the Cities for Climate Protection revealed the levels and sources of the city's emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

The community released the equivalent of 1.2 million tons of carbon dioxide in 2000. That's projected to increase 40 percent to 1.7 million in 2010.

Vehicles were the main culprits, responsible for about one-third of the pollution, and vehicle emissions are forecast to double in 10 years, according to the CCP report.

It's a different picture for city government, which is responsible for nearly 2 percent of the

citywide emissions.

The biggest polluters on the municipal side are government buildings, which account for some 68 percent of greenhouse gases. Some 20 percent of the greenhouse gases come from the city's fleet of vehicles.

Nashua joined more than 150 towns and cities in the United States that are involved with CCP, with 674 participants in 30 countries. Nashua got involved with the program in 2000, but it was largely dormant until December.

CCP is a project of the Local Government for Sustainability, with a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by recruiting local governments.

Susan Ode, an outreach officer for the environmental organization based in Oakland, Calif., said local governments are "leading by example" and can influence other levels of government.

About 20 percent of the nation's population lives in communities participating in the CCP program, she said.

Municipalities benefit by saving money, making operations more efficient, bettering air quality and improving the quality of life, Ode said, adding a national pollution reduction effort is needed, too.

The CCP's 2005 annual report estimates participants eliminate some 23 million tons of greenhouse gases annually, which is about the same amount of pollution emitted from 4 million vehicles or 1.8 million homes.



Indeed, states and communities are stepping in to try to control greenhouse gases, as some complain the federal government isn't doing enough.

In December, Gov. John Lynch joined governors from six other Northeast states to sign an agreement on a regional climate change and energy program known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

If approved by the Legislature, carbon dioxide emissions from power plants would be capped at 2005 levels for 10 years, and then the states would reduce emissions incrementally to achieve a 10 percent reduction by 2019.

Keene, which joined in 2000, is the only other city in New Hampshire signed up with the CCP program.

The revival of the program in Nashua started at a meeting in early December, when some 30 city administrators and residents brainstormed about short-term projects. Ideas included having school buses run on biodiesel fuel, using sleep modes more often on computers and turning down thermostats.

Now, Nashua's green team is formulating a plan to curb emissions with bite-sized initiatives.

Vincent, an urban planner in the community development division with a master's degree in natural resources management, said she's pleased to see city departments adopt changes, but wants them to act in unison.

One small victory came with an e-mail sent before the long Thanksgiving weekend. The message: Turn off your computers.

In the past, computers would have stayed on to update virus protection software. Vincent said the information technology department rearranged the update so the computers wouldn't be using power needlessly during the long weekend.

Also, four departments took steps to retrofit buildings with electricity-saving programs. City Hall, the public works garage, the public health and community services building, and the Nashua Public Library earned \$47,290 in rebates in 2005 for their Earth-friendly investments, Vincent said.

But there is still a ways to go. The city has adopted a local law that requires telling potential vendors that the city supports buying recycled goods, biodegradable material and other environmentally sound items. However, a review of five bid forms on the city's Web site showed no references to those environmental concerns.

And restrictive city spending will be an obstacle for some time, since the city can't afford to look at system-wide programs, Vincent said.

So for now, the city is more focused on small steps.

At the rear doors of City Hall, Vincent pointed out small red exit signs.

Burning all day and all night, the lights suck up energy 24 hours a day. The emergency lights all around City Hall can be tweaked to save money, she said.

"It's a lot of small wins that aren't going to cost a lot. It's small stuff," she said. "But things in the long run do make a difference."

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